

Collateral Effects of the Media on Sex Offender Reintegration: Perceptions of Sex Offenders, Professionals, and the Lay Public

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Abstract

Aim/Background: Sexual offending results in devastating consequences for victims and is of great concern to the public; prevention of re-offending is an important endeavour. The media has a marked influence on public views and frequently draws attention to sex offenders, often producing sensational stories about them. Doing so may affect sex offenders' opportunities for reintegration into the community, by affecting their reception by the public and thereby increasing their risk of recidivism.

Methods: The current study surveyed 167 sex offenders, professionals who work with them, and university students regarding their perceptions of how the media portrays sex offenders and the effects these portrayals have on sex offender reintegration. The potential moderating effect of attitudes was evaluated using the CATSO.

Results: Overall, participants indicated that the media portrays sex offenders negatively. The sample also identified a number of specific sex offender reintegration factors, such as housing, jobs, and relationships, as being negatively impacted by the media's portrayal of sex offenders. No significant effects of attitudes, as measured by the CATSO, were observed.

Conclusions: The overall sample agreed that the media presents sex offenders in a negative manner, that media portrayals of sex offenders affect public attitudes towards sex offenders, and that these negative portrayals affect a number of specific reintegration factors (i.e., housing, employment, etc). Due to the relationship between community reintegration and recidivism, it was concluded that the link between media portrayals of sex offenders and reintegration should be explored further.

Keywords: media portrayals, perceptions, sex offenders, professionals, public, reintegration, desistance

Introduction

Although sex offenders are more likely to serve jail time than other violent offenders, by law the vast majority of these offenders are released back into the community (Kong, Johnson, Beattie, & Cardillo, 2003). Given this reality, a focus on desistance, the process of ceasing criminal offending and becoming a lawful citizen after a sex offender has served his sentence (Willis, Levenson, & Ward, 2010), is in Canadian society's best interests.

Sexual offences are typically the most feared, are perceived as the most serious of offences, and

prompt the strongest negative reactions from the public (Public Safety Canada, 2007). Even among offenders in prisons, sex offenders face the greatest animosity, hold low status, and are seen as outcasts by other inmates (Sapp & Vaughn, 1990). Tewksbury and Mustaine (2009) indicated that due to the drastically low social ranking and negative associations with sex offenders in society, punishments for sex offenders have become increasingly punitive. In the United States, public outcry and in response to media coverage of the release of sex offenders has led to protective legislation (e.g., sex offender registries, community notification, housing restrictions etc.) (Sample & Kadleck, 2008; Willis et al., 2010). This legislation has led to many unintended consequences for offenders trying to reintegrate into the community (Levenson, D'Amora, & Hern, 2007). In fact, many of these policies may actually serve to increase recidivism because they isolate, stigmatize, and alienate offenders in the community (Tewksbury & Lees, 2006). These public policies and attitudes persist despite the fact that research regarding sex offender recidivism has consistently found that sexual offending has one of the lowest base rates of all criminal offences (Hanson & Bussière, 1998).

Attitudes about sexual offenders may well be associated with their portrayal in the media. The media, which include outlets such as the Internet, newspapers, television, and radio, can influence public attitudes and may thereby impact the reintegration of sex offenders into the community. According to Berlin & Malin (1991), harsh, negative, and mostly inaccurate claims about sexual offenders are presented in the media. These claims influence the opinions of members of the public as well as professionals who work with sex offenders.

Desistance theory states that all offenders are foremost human beings, and once they have completed their time in jail, or are being successfully supervised in the community, they have the right to live their lives just as all other citizens (Willis, et al., 2010). Factors associated with re-offending among sex offenders include poor social supports, antisocial lifestyles, poor self-management strategies, and difficulties cooperating with community supervision (Hanson & Harris, 2000). Previous research suggests that if released offenders are provided with the opportunity to find stable housing, employment, positive relationships, and other supports, they are more likely to desist from sexual offending (Willis et al., 2010). The portrayal of sex offenders in the media may impact these reintegration factors, such as an offender's ability to gain and maintain employment and live a pro-social lifestyle upon release from jail, due to the influence of the media on the attitudes of members of the community. Currently, in Canada there is no formal reintegration system in place for sex offenders (Vandiver, Dial, & Worley, 2008) and thus offenders must attempt to build connections in their communities on an individual basis with little to no support. By producing sensational stories about these offenders, and influencing public attitudes, the media may indirectly affect offenders' opportunities and efforts for reintegration into the community.

Understanding factors that influence a convicted sex offender's ability to successfully reintegrate into the community is an important aspect of preventing further criminal behaviour. Because the media has a marked influence on public views and frequently draws attention to sex offenders, it is important to study the role it plays in offender reintegration. The proposed study sought to explore this issue by surveying the perceptions of sex offenders, professionals who work with them, and a control group of university students regarding how the media portrays sex offenders and the media's effect on sex offender reintegration in Canada.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The current study was designed to begin to explore the impact of the media on sex offender reintegration. It was intended to address the following research questions:

1. Does the media provide a negative portrayal of sex offenders?
2. Does the media have an influence over public perceptions?
3. Does the media's portrayal of sex offenders negatively influence the public's opinions of sex offenders?
4. Does the media have a negative impact on particular aspects of sex offender reintegration?
5. Are an individual's attitudes towards sex offenders related to one's view that (a) the media portrays sex offenders in an overly negative way, (b) the media influences public perceptions of sex offenders, and (c) the media?

To begin to address these larger questions, the authors explicitly sought out the opinions of sex offenders, professionals, and university students (i.e., the public). The specific hypotheses tested in this study are as follows:

1. Participants will agree with a majority of statements indicating that the media presents sex offenders in a negative way.
2. Participants will agree with a majority of statements indicating that the media influences public perceptions (in general).
3. Participants will agree with a majority of statements indicating that the media has a negative impact on the public's opinions of sex offenders.
4. More negative attitudes towards sex offenders, as measured by scores on the Community Attitudes Towards Sex Offenders (CATSO) scale, will be inversely related to perceptions of the media's negative impact on sex offender reintegration. (i.e., someone who holds negative attitudes towards sex offenders will be less likely to report that the media has inaccurately portrayed these offenders and impacted their lives unfairly). Here, it was assumed that more negative attitudes would lead participants to assume that negative outcomes for sex offenders were attributable to internal characteristics (i.e., that they "get what they deserve").

Additionally, this study explored participants' perceptions of the media's impact on specific sex offender reintegration factors, such as access to social supports, housing, employment, etc.

Method

Instruments

Participants completed a three page, four-section survey titled, Media and Sex Offenders Survey (created for the current study), the CATSO scale (Church, Wakeman, Miller, Clements, & Sun, 2008), and a demographic questionnaire.

Media and Sex Offenders Survey

This 48 item survey was designed to elicit the participants' perceptions about the media's portrayal of sex offenders and impact on sex offender reintegration. Several items were derived (with permission from the authors) from surveys used in previous research (Brannon, Levenson, Fortney, & Baker, 2007; Levenson & Cotter, 2005); all remaining items were created by the author. Participants were asked to rate their degree of agreement on a five point Likert scale.

The survey included four sections, addressing: perceptions of the media's negative portrayal of sex offenders (e.g., "News media describes sex offenders as offenders with a high risk to re-offend"), general perceptions of the media (e.g., "The media's stories influence the opinions of the general

public"), the media's effects on the public's opinion about sex offenders (e.g., "Because of how news media talks about sex offenders the public believes sex offenders are not treatable"), and the media's negative influence over specific reintegration factors (e.g., "Because of how the media portrays sexual offenders, sex offenders in the community have less access to employment opportunities").

For the purposes of analysis, items scored as agree or strongly agree were tallied (i.e., scored one point each).

The Community Attitudes Towards Sex Offenders (CATSO) Scale

The CATSO scale was developed in 2008 by Church and colleagues in order to examine attitudes, perceptions and stereotypes concerning sex offenders (Church et al., 2008). This survey consists of 18 statements regarding sex offenders that are rated by participants using a six-point Likert scale with the following options: strongly disagree, disagree, probably disagree, probably agree, agree, and strongly agree. Higher scores represent more negative attitudes toward sex offenders. The authors intended that the scale be used in numerous settings with various populations.

Procedures

The survey was approved by a University Research Ethics Board and by each organization and program that was approached to participate. Informed consent was implied by completion of the survey. The survey was confidential and anonymous and was distributed either directly to participants via the lead researcher, or via a contact person at each site. After completion, surveys were collected on site, placed in an envelope to be collected later on, or mailed directly to the lead researcher.

Participants

The study included 167 total participants, divided into three groups: 62 male sex offenders, 52 professionals who work with sex offenders, and 56 undergraduate university students.

Offenders were recruited from several sites in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada and the surrounding areas including from an inpatient treatment unit, (the Phoenix Program of Alberta Hospital Edmonton), sex offender treatment groups led in the community, and probation offices. A nonrandom convenience sample was recruited from professionals who had recently or were currently actively involved in the assessment and/or treatment of sexual offenders, and included forensic psychiatric hospital staff, professionals leading treatment groups, and probation officers. University students enrolled in 100 level Psychology courses at the University of Alberta were solicited to participate.

Table 1 below shows the demographic characteristics of the sample by group. Of note, there was a significant age difference between the student sample group and the other two groups ($p < .001$). On average, professionals in the sample had over 10 years of experience working with sex offenders and nearly half of the sample (46.2%) was made up of probation officers.

Table 1: Demographic Information of the sample by Group

Groups/Descriptors	Frequency	Percent	<i>M (SD)</i>
Sex Offenders (n = 62)			
Age			40.21 (13.75)
<i>Race</i>			
- Caucasian	53	85.5%	
- African American	2	3.2%	
- Aboriginal	5	8.1%	
- Other	8	3.2%	
<i>Education Level¹ (n = 60)</i>			
- Less than grade 9	3	4.8%	
- Grade 9 and some high school	20	32.3%	
- GED	4	6.5%	
- High school graduate	9	14.5%	
- Some college/university	15	24.2%	
- College/university graduate	9	14.5%	
<i>Most Recent Sexual Conviction²</i>			
- Molestation of Minors	22	35.5%	
- Sexual Assault Adult	6	9.7%	
- Peeping/vouyering	3	4.8%	
- Exposing	9	14.5%	
- Computer related sex crime	18	29.0%	
- Other	9	14.5%	
Has prior sexual offence(s)	14	22.6%	
Has contact offence(s) against children	32	51.6%	
Has prior criminal offence(s)	20	32.3%	
Professionals (n = 52)			
Age			39.60 (10.42)
<i>Gender</i>			
- Male	18	34.6%	
- Female	34	65.4%	
<i>Education Level</i>			
- High school diploma	0	0.0%	
- Bachelor/professional degree	36	69.2%	

- Master's degree	8	15.4%	
- Doctoral/Medial degree	8	15.4%	
- Other	0	0.0%	
<i>Work Discipline</i>			
- Psychiatry	5	9.6%	
- Psychology	7	13.5%	
- Correctional Worker/Parole Officer	24	46.2%	
- Occupational Therapy	1	1.9%	
- Social Work	7	13.5%	
- Nursing	4	7.7%	
- Other	4	7.7%	
Time (years) working in current position			8.01 (8.02)
Time (years) working with sex offenders			10.43 (8.03)
Students (n = 56)			
Age			19.18 (3.25)
<i>Gender</i>			
- Male	20	35.7%	
- Female	36	64.3%	
<i>Education Level¹ (N = 55)</i>			
- 1st year undergraduate	36	64.3%	
- 2nd year undergraduate	12	21.4%	
- 3rd year undergraduate	5	8.9%	
- 4th year undergraduate	2	3.6%	
- 5th year +	0	0.0%	

¹ Denotes that percentages do not equal 100 due to missing data

² Denotes that percentages equal more than 100 due to the option of endorsing multiple categories

Results

Perceptions of the Media's Portrayal of and Impact on Sex Offenders

Media's Portrayal of Sex Offenders (Section A). On average, the sample endorsed (i.e. selected either "agree" or "strongly agree") 5.2 of 8 items ($SD = 1.6$) indicating that the media portrays sex offenders in a negative manner. Rates of agreement were significantly greater than chance, $t(164) = 10.1$, $p < .001$. Results from a one-way ANOVA revealed no significant differences among groups.

General Views About the Media and Its Influence (Section B-1). On average, the sample endorsed 2.8 of 5 items ($SD = 0.7$) indicating that the media is generally accurate and has an impact on people's opinions. Rates of agreement were significantly greater than chance, $t(164) = 6.1$, $p < .001$. Results from a one-way ANOVA revealed no significant differences among groups.

Media's Influence on Public Perceptions of Sex Offenders (Section B-2). On average, the sample endorsed 6.1 of 8 items ($SD = 2.1$) indicating that the media negatively impacts public perceptions of sex offenders. Rates of agreement were significantly greater than chance, $t(168) = 13.0$, $p < .001$. Results from a one-way ANOVA revealed no significant differences among groups.

Media's Influence on Factors Related to Sex Offender Reintegration (Section C). Specific reintegration factors that participants rated as being negatively impacted by the media's portrayal of sex offenders were further examined. On average, the sample endorsed 7.8 of 14 items ($SD = 3.3$) outlining specific sex offender reintegration factors negatively impacted by the media. Rates of agreement were significantly greater than chance, $t(166) = 3.1$, $p < .002$.

A descriptive item-by-item analysis was conducted utilizing percentage agreement (i.e. the percentage of participants endorsing "agree" or "strongly agree" was calculated for each statement). Table 2 includes a breakdown of the percentage of agreement by each group and by the overall sample for each item contained in Section C.

Table 2: Section C: Media's Impact on Reintegration Factors, Item Percentage Agreement analysis

Items	% of Participants that Agree/Strongly Agree			
	Sex Offenders	Professionals	Student	Overall Sample
<i>Media's portrayal of SO leads to:</i>				
C33 Difficulties in finding a job	69.4	69.2	87.5	75.3
C34 Difficulties in finding a place to live	62.9	76.9	80.4	72.9
C35 Difficulties making positive relationships	69.3	73.1	83.9	75.3
C36 Difficulties with financial stability	62.9	59.6	69.7	64.1
C37 Physical threats	33.9	59.6	50.0	61.8
C38 Verbal threats	42.0	67.3	73.2	60.0
C39 Less access to employment opportunities	77.4	71.2	89.2	79.4
C40 Less access to social/MH treatment	14.6	13.4	16.1	14.7
C41 Less access to supportive family/friends	38.7	32.7	66.1	45.9
C42 Increased feelings of isolation	56.5	71.1	73.2	66.5

C43 Negative undeserved consequences	48.4	59.7	17.9	30.0
C44 More stress	62.9	55.8	75.0	64.7
C45 Increased motivation to stop offending*	9.7	57.6	28.6	30.6
C46 People more supportive of SO recovery*	29.1	63.5	39.3	42.9

*Denotes items that were reverse scored.

Relationship Between Attitudes Towards Sex Offenders and Perceptions of Media's Impact on Sex Offenders

Results from the bivariate correlational analysis between the CATSO scale total scores and each section of the Media and Sex Offenders survey revealed no significant relationships.

Discussion

This study was intended to explore the possible negative impacts of the media on sex offender reintegration. Overall, our sample agreed that the media presents sex offenders negatively. Results are consistent with the conclusions drawn by other researchers that the media portrays sex offenders negatively and perpetuates erroneous stereotypes about these offenders (Kjelsberg & Loos, 2008). The sample also agreed that the media is viewed as an accurate source of information and generally does have an influence over the opinions of the public, and in particular that the media negatively influences the public's opinions of sex offenders. No significant relationships emerged between the CATSO and the four survey sections. This suggests that regardless of the participants' own attitudes towards sex offenders, they were in agreement that the media likely negatively impacts sex offenders.

The overall sample also identified a number of specific sex offender reintegration factors that are negatively impacted by the media's portrayal of sex offenders. In particular, the majority of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the media's portrayal of sex offenders negatively impacts their ability to find a job, have access to employment opportunities, find a place to live, make new positive relationships, and be financially stable, and also may increase feelings of isolation, loneliness, and the amount of stress. Notably, rates of agreement were as high as 79%, 73%, and 75% for items relating to employment, housing, and relationships respectively - reintegration factors that have proven to predict recidivism (Hanson & Harris, 2000).

The findings regarding the negative impact on the more general areas of employment, relationships, and housing are congruent with previous research reporting the effects of community notification and residential restriction policies in the U.S. (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2009). Despite the fact that Canadian legislation, unlike U.S. counterparts, do not allow for public access to offender information, the media likely has a similar negative impact by creating negative publicity surrounding sex offenders. Levenson, Fortney and Baker (2009) indicated that, "attitudes can affect treatment, teaching, research, public education, advocacy, and policy decisions" (p. 166); therefore continued research of the views of the public, professionals, and sex offenders is an important endeavour.

By negatively impacting dynamic factors associated with recidivism (Hanson & Harris, 2000), the media's influence likely serves to make offenders' reintegration into society more difficult and may inadvertently raise their risk for recidivism. It seems clear that the link between the media's portrayals of sex offenders and their success in reintegrating into the community is an area that needs to be explored further.

Ultimately, it is hoped that the current study will stimulate further discussion and will draw attention to a potential need for programming to assist sex offenders in establishing connections and reintegrating themselves into the community, such as restorative justice approaches previously implemented in Ontario, Canada (Petrunik, 2002). While the reliance on direct solicitation of opinions is a limitation of this study, the sex offenders' perceptions of public opinions about themselves are likely relevant to the ultimate issue of reintegration. Surely the expectation of a negative reception could reasonably impact sex offenders' motivation to seek out connections. Of course, this study comprises an early exploration of the issue and further study is certainly warranted.

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